

**IN HISTORY AND IN PHILOSOPHY**

Praeter haec duo cognitionis genera datur, ut in sequentibus ostendam, aliud tertium, quod scientiam intuitivam vocabimus.

Apart from these two ways of knowing there is, as I shall show, a third one, that we shall call intuitive knowledge. (my translation)  
—B. de Spinoza, *Ethica* (Pars Secunda, Prop. XL, Schol. II)

**1.1 THE “REBIRTH OF CENTRIPETALITY”**

It has taken me far too long to complete this book. The explanation is that I arrived at the notion of experience that is addressed in it from different perspectives—and it took me quite some time to adjust them to each other in a satisfactory way.

The first perspective originated in recent developments in history and historical theory and the other one originated in recent developments in philosophy. In both of them one may observe a shift away from language toward experience. This shift probably reflects a more general shift in contemporary culture; one could describe it as a moving away from comprehensive systems of meaning to meaning as bound to specific situations and events.<sup>1</sup> But before turning to historical theory and philosophy, I want to begin by saying a few words about this.

Meaning no longer travels as freely and easily through time and space as it used to do: Its ties to its place of origin tend to become stronger than ever before. Think, for example, of what is left of those comprehensive systems claiming to give meaning to all of humanity and to comprise all of the past, the present and the future? It has been observed that in the contemporary world the present tends to “devour” both the future and the past and that the “circles” of cultural, narrative, and textual meaning become

to courageously expand the scope of cultural, narrative, and textualing;<sup>3</sup> it now preferably draws its content from how the world is given in *experience*. “Theory” and meaning no longer travel in the same direction; meaning has now found a new and more promising traveling companion in experience. And, needless to say, we can recognize this *moment des alliances* and fathom its implications only to the extent that we are prepared to grant to experience an autonomy of its own in its relation to “theory.” Only then are we in the position to recognize that experience does really possess the capacity to explode the matrix within which “theory” has enclosed meaning.

If, then, experience now rebels against the imperialism of “theory” that has been so all-pervasive in all of contemporary philosophy of culture and of language, we should ask ourselves how it could be successful in its revolt against “theory” and what we may associate with it. As we see in the course of this book, the role that is assigned to the subject is, in the end, decisive in this tug of war between “theory” and experience. If the role of the subject is negligible or even wholly nonexistent—as is the case with the philosophy, language, and culture until quite recently—then “theory” will hold all the trumps and the game will be lost for experience. We will find ourselves in the world of the post-structuralist’s “language without man,” where the subject, or the author, is, at best, a mere attribute of language—hence, in a world that is inhabited by almost all contemporary philosophers of language and culture, even if they would not hesitate to express their deeply felt repugnance to such hyperbolic post-structuralist conclusions. So the rediscovery of experience is also the rediscovery of the subject, and vice versa—the one entails the other.

## 1.2 HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEORY

This, then, brings me to the first perspective from which the subject originates: history and historical theory. Undoubtedly one of the fa



escape from the “prisonhouse of language” (to use Nietzsche’s metaphor) and from how language determines our conceptions of the past. Can we rescue the past itself from how we speak about it? More specifically, can the historian enter into a real, authentic, and “experiential” relationship to the past—that is, into a relationship that is not contaminated by the historiographical tradition, disciplinary presuppositions, and linguistic structures such as identified by Hayden White in his *Metahistory* of the past? When asking ourselves this kind of question, we have to do with “experiential experience,” that is, with the historian’s experience of the past. Then the crucial question is whether it is (historical) experience that can enable us to break through the walls of “the prisonhouse of language,” and this, in fact, is the main question to be addressed in this book.

Furthermore, these shifts from language to experience in both literary and historical theory happily joined and mutually reinforced each other in the recent fascination for notions such as (collective) memory, trauma, Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, and (the representation of) the Holocaust—in sum, in all these tendencies in contemporary historical writing that can be taken together under the rubric of what I once named as “the privatization of the past.”<sup>6</sup> Characteristic of this privatization of the past is that we now tend to use the term *memory* where we previously preferred to speak of “History” or of “the past.”<sup>7</sup> This new idiom signifies an interesting shift in the nature of contemporary historical consciousness.

In the first place, the notion of “History” has the aura of the inevitable, eluctable and of a fate that we cannot escape; similarly, the notion of the past is suggestive of an objective reality outside our grasp and inaccessible. This is different, of course, with memory. Ordinarily we remember only if we wish to (trauma being the paradigmatic exception, of course), and we are all very much aware of the pliability of memory. Apparently, the contemporary past is a much less fixed and final past than that of a century ago.<sup>8</sup> It is no longer the massive objective reality that it used to be.

sound slightly ridiculous) to ask how we “experience” the past. Although the *remembered* past undoubtedly is a past that we “experience” in one or another, memory gives us an experience or re-experience of the remembered past. Hence, when we start defining our relationship to the past in terms of “memory” rather than in terms of “history,” we cannot avoid the question of whether we can *experience* the past and, if so, what meaning should be given to this notion of “the experience of the past” or to the notion of “historical experience.”

So, in this way “experience” can be said to have been the pole around which guiding both contemporary historical writing and historical theory in recent times.

### 1.3 PHILOSOPHY

The second perspective from which this book has been written originates in the state of affairs in contemporary philosophy. Twentieth-century philosophy has predominantly been a philosophy of language. And this is true not only of (Anglo-Saxon) analytical philosophy. The issue of language was, and is, no less prominent in (logical-positivist) philosophy of science, in phenomenology, in Heideggerian existential philosophy, in (post-)structuralism, and in deconstructivism, and so on. So, language has been the self-evident object and point of departure of almost all of twentieth-century philosophy. However, in the last ten to fifteen years we may observe in contemporary philosophy two developments signaling a move away from this exclusive emphasis on language.

In the first place, questions one used to formulate in the discourse of philosophy of language are now often reformulated in that of consciousness. We may think here of the writings of Dennett and Searle and of many others who have dealt with the topic of consciousness since the 1970s. And this can be interpreted as a movement toward experience. Let us

cal speculation since Descartes have been one sustained effort to flesh of philosophical detail on this bare skeleton.

But if we agree that this is how these three notions are basic related, it follows that this move from language to consciousness is, in part, a move toward experience. Indeed, language can do quite without experience (although not without consciousness<sup>11</sup>): It is a world of socialized meanings and permits permutations of elements of its grammar that do not have counterparts in experience—the language of mathematics, of course, the paramount example. But, in opposition to language, consciousness and its representations of the world could not exist without experience. The content of consciousness and its representations of the world are given to us in and by experience. Without experience, there is no consciousness. So, if we move from language to consciousness, the move toward experience becomes an ineluctable item on the philosopher's agenda.

And this brings me, more or less automatically, to a second feature of contemporary philosophy. I am thinking here of the more or less recent elevation of aesthetics from a position of relative obscurity into a topic that is most eagerly and enthusiastically discussed in contemporary philosophy. It would, of course, be absurd to say that art has taken the place of philosophy as the philosopher's preferred domain of inspiration, but it can hardly be doubted that science has recently lost a good deal of terrain to art. If we think again of these three notions—experience, consciousness, and language—who would doubt that art has its elective affinity with experience rather than with language? Art is not a language—and all the work of Nelson Goodman to identify the grammar and the semantics of the “languages of art” are now seen as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the cognitive approach to art rather than as a viable program for the philosophy of art. We feel much more at ease nowadays with Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and Wollheim's, and Arthur Danto's openness to the experiential dimensions of the work of art and to how experience is expressed in and by art.

#### 1.4 FROM THE RATIONALISM OF "THEORY" TO A NEW ROMANTICISM

So, in both history and philosophy we may observe an effort to rehabilitate the almost forgotten and thoroughly marginalized category of experience, a category that, if noticed at all, was regarded with so much contempt and disdain in most of the twentieth century's philosophy of language. The main topic of this book, therefore, is to contribute to the resuscitation of the notion of experience from its apparent death, to explain and to explain the parallelism of the relevant development in both historical writing and in philosophy, and, more specifically, to show what less historical writing can teach the philosopher.

Next, when hearing the word *experience* we immediately think of sensory experience, of how we get access to the world by seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling. And the fact that the sciences can be seen as a refinement of sensory perception still further contributed to our tendency to model experience on how the world is given to us in the experience of what we can see, hear, and so on. *This book, however, proposes the unorthodox thesis that there is also such a thing as "intellectual experience" and that our minds can function as a receptacle of experience no less than our eyes, ears, and fingers.* Our minds inhabit a world of potential objects of intellectual experience. These objects may be either as well defined as the objects of intellectual experience that Popper had in mind with his theory of "a third world of ideas"<sup>12</sup> or as vague but all-pervasive as what Carl Becker once described as "the climate of opinion" of a historical period.<sup>13</sup> And the objects in this "third world" are no less potential objects of (intellectual) experience than the objects of sensory experience constituting the daily reality we find around ourselves. The objection that these objects of intellectual experience should be mere constructions of more elementary components and can therefore never be experienced *as such*, is just as idle as the

granted to it. But on the other hand, the empiricism defended here never go along with the transcendentalization of experience so characteristic of Western philosophy from Descartes, Bacon, and Kant down to the temporary variants of (neo-)positivism. One of the more interesting differences between science and history undoubtedly is that in science (and in the philosophy of science) there is a natural alliance between empiricism and positivism, whereas in history the more empiricist one becomes, the more one will move away from positivism. The explanation is that the relationship between experience and the subject of experience is different in science and in history. In science the subject of experience is defined transcendently and because of this, in principle, it is compatible with the actual content of experience. It is compatible with any kind of experience since the transcendental self processes the data of experience in such a way that it can digest them—and self-evidently experience has then lost its autonomy to the self's transcendental structures, to language, to "theory" (and all its variants), and so on. This is different in history. Since I cannot say the last word about this here, I must suffice with an appeal to the notion of *Bildung*. This basically Aristotelian notion is suggestive of what we might describe as "formative experience" (*Bildung* = formation) in which how our mental framework may be "formed" by experience. With *Bildung*, experience enters into the definition of the subject of experience, whereas it will require no elucidation that science would immediately become impossible with such an intimate interaction between experience and the scientist. To put it succinctly, in science experience is an attribute of the world and in history it is both this and an attribute of the subject.

So in this way, in history, we can ascribe to the mind the faculty of experiencing as well, even though the mind does not possess any organ equivalent to our eyes or ears for registering what is given to us; it would surely be a sad and unforgivable mistake to see in this an invitation to reduce *intellectual* experience to some complicated combination of *sensory* experiences—as positivists and mainstream philosophers of



a reality that has somehow “broken off” from a timeless present. The “the moment of loss.” But at the same time historical experience aims recovery of the past by transcending again the barriers between past and present. And this could be characterized as “the moment of desire or love.” All of historical writing is to be situated in the space enclosed by these complementary movements of the discovery (loss) and the recovery of the past (love) that constitute together the realm of historical experience. Past and present are related to each other as man and wife in Plato’s myth of the origin of the sexes referred to in the second epigraph of this book. *The sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure and how we relate to the past.*

The results of the reorientation recommended in the present study will be twofold. In the first place I hope to show that historical writing is a true gold mine for the philosopher, a gold mine that has been sadly neglected and ignored by philosophers since the death of neo-Kantianism and from which a number of new and exciting philosophical issues can be delved into. More specifically, I hope to show in this book that a set of new and important questions will demand the philosopher’s attention, i.e. to move from philosophy’s traditional fixation on issues of truth to issues of experience occasioned by the notion of experience, to assume a perspective from which we can consider truth and experience *ex aequo* and that will enable us to discuss experience independently from questions of truth. I am well aware that this places this book in direct opposition to most of contemporary philosophy. I do not know of any philosophers (with the possible exception of Dewey<sup>15</sup>) who have advocated this radical disconnection of truth and experience.<sup>16</sup> Experience is always seen (if it is seen at all) as the meek and obedient servant of truth. But the claim that there is a variant of experience preceding and transcending questions of truth and falsity is precisely the main thesis of this book.

In the second place, getting access to this philosophical gold mine

phy of history has achieved its indisputable triumphs. Hayden White's seminal work on the tropology of the historical text is the first and most obvious example to come to mind. We owe to this a new variant of the history of historical writing and this surely is a *ktèma eis aei*.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, a high price had to be paid for this. The result was a new historical theory for which *il n'y a pas dehors texte*.<sup>18</sup> The radical "othering" of the past—and where it sometimes put to shame all our categories (linguistic or otherwise) for making sense of the world, or of the world—was thus eliminated. This book is mainly an attempt to rectify that. It is to do away with all the (quasi-)transcendentalist conceptions we met in the past, not only in tropology but also in hermeneutics, deconstructivism, post-structuralism, or semiotics. It can therefore be seen as an uncompromising attack on all that came to be known over the last twenty to thirty years under the name of "theory." The "rationalism" that "theory" took over from the transcendentalist philosophy of language will be rejected here in the name of the notion of *experience*. The intellectual bureaucracy of "theory" that has been this book be replaced by the "Romanticism" of an approach to the past involving all of the historian's personality and not just (or even merely) the formalism of his or her cognitive faculties. More specifically, this book is a rehabilitation of the romanticist's world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past. How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it—and probably even more so. "*Sentir, c'est penser*," as Rousseau liked to say, and this is where I can agree with him.

So I invite the reader of this book to enter the dark and sometimes even sinister Romantic world of the profoundest and quasi-existential layers in our relationship to the past—a dimension of historical consciousness that had effectively been filtered out by the transcendentalist and cognitivism of "theory," although I shall be the first to admit that, like it was two centuries ago, one can only get to Romanticism after

ment. But, in the end, both the Enlightenment and “theory” resulted in icy formalism, freezing all that may move the human heart. As the Dutch novelist Nicolaas Beets (1814–1903) amusingly put it in 1837, the Enlightenment “gave us the chilly formalism of  $A + B = C$ . The temperature decreased from that of human blood to that of frost. It literally snowed on our ideas. It was a fresh but, in the end, uncomfortable cold.”<sup>20</sup> So let us store to our thinking about history and about historical writing at least something of the warmth of the human heart and of what has a resonance in the depths of our souls.

## 1.5 OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Let me end this introduction with a brief sketch of what the reader may expect to find in this book. The first two chapters begin the reevaluation of experience with an attack on its most redoubtable enemy: linguistic transcendentalism. An important theme running through all of the present study is the incompatibility of language and experience, as the latter word is understood here. No compromise is possible between language and experience, and the triumphs of the one are inevitably the defeats of the other. They truly are each other’s mortal enemies: Where you have language, experience is not, and vice versa. We have language in order to have experience and to avoid the fears and terrors that are typically evoked by experience; language is the shield protecting us against the terror of a direct contact with the world as conveyed by experience. Language presents us with an image of the world, but as such it can offer only a shadow of the terrors inhabiting the world itself and of the fears that it can provoke. Language, the symbolic order, enables us to escape the perils of a direct confrontation with the world as it is given us in experience.

It is argued that Richard Rorty, who has done the most to undermine linguistic transcendentalism, in the end sides with it and against exper-

is the appropriate point of departure for this book. Readers not interested in the pros and cons of linguistic transcendentalism had best skip chapter 1 and start right away with Chapter 2, section 3. In the course of chapter 2 the project that Rorty began with his critique of transcendentalism is carried to its logical conclusion, and the shortcomings of this lack of democracy<sup>21</sup> of “theory” (hermeneutics, [post-]structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, rhetoric, tropology, and so on) are expounded. Chapter 3 discusses Huizinga’s notion of historical experience and how Huizinga translated his own historical experience of the culture of the late Middle Ages into language. In Chapter 4 it is shown that the preoccupation with historical experience is far from being of a recent date, and an account is given of what has been said about it by Herder and Goethe and, more recently, by Eichendorff, Burckhardt, and Benjamin.

Chapter 5 continues this account to the present with an analysis of Gadamer’s conception of (historical) experience. Since Gadamer has undoubtedly been my most important discussion partner while writing this book, this chapter can be seen as the hinge around which all of my argument turns. The results of this chapter can be summarized with the following four claims. First, for a correct appreciation of the notion of historical experience investigated in this book, *we will be required to have the courage to disconnect truth and experience*. Second, this unconventional anti-cognitivist conception of experience thus automatically sides with the familiar problems and issues occasioned by and discussed with cognitivist approaches to historical writings and historical consciousness. Third, think, for example, of the perennial seesaw between historicism<sup>22</sup> and universalism or of the objectivity issue. Fourth, the disjunction of experience and truth will require us to postulate a conception of experience that does not entail the existence of a subject of experience. Fourth, although these claims will sound most unbelievable, if not simply absurd, as long as we think of how we, as human individuals, experience the world, they will

historical experience can best be understood from the perspective of Dewey's notion of pragmatist aesthetic experience.

Whereas these first six chapters are mainly theoretical in character, the last two attempt to give a practical illustration of what one can do with the notion of historical experience. Chapter 7 gives two examples of how historical experience may give us access to the past; a capriccio by Guardi and rococo ornament will be my examples for illustrating the nature of historical experience. What I readily confess to have experienced as *une terrible nécessité* demands that my argument shall be here, basically, autobiographical. Chapter 8, finally, suggests in what way the notion of historical experience may contribute to a better understanding of the emergence of Western historical consciousness and what its nature is. The notion of historical experience refers here to how a civilization may relate to its past as expressed in and by its historical consciousness. It is argued that if we wish to grasp the nature of (Western) historical consciousness, we shall have to focus on what one might call "experiences of rupture," in which a civilization discards a former identity while defining its new identity precisely in terms of what has been discarded and surrendered. The identification and investigation of these sublime experiences of rupture—think of the Renaissance and of the French Revolution—could be seen as the "research program" suggested or implied by this book. For other examples of these experiences of rupture one might think of how in the U.S. South the trauma of the Civil War can still be felt<sup>23</sup> and of how this may stimulate a feeling of awe and regret in even an occasional visitor to the South (like myself in 1995). Similarly, one might well ask the question of how the past is nowadays experienced in Russia after the two dramatic caesuras of 1917 and 1989. In sum, if we wish to understand how we relate to our past—and is this the proper object of study of all historical theory?—we must carefully and painstakingly investigate the history of historical experience. That is, the epos of how Western man experienced his past all through the centuries.

liberate the history of historical experience from the heavy and oppressive weight of (the historian's) language and to unearth experience from thick sedimentary strata of language covering it. What is the experience of the past underlying the language used by the historian? That is the question asked in this book. The book ends with an epilogue in which the argument about the nature of sublime historical experience is related to Rousseau of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* and, especially, to Hermlin's novel *Hyperion*. This implies, in fact, the return to a stage before the victory of historicism over natural law philosophy. In this way this book can be seen both as a moving beyond historicism *and* as a comeback to wretchedly dated historicism.

#### 1.6 DIRECTIONS FOR USE—AND A WARNING

Last but not least, I most emphatically insist that this is a book about sublime historical experience—*and not about anything else* (such as historical explanation, causality, narrative, or representation). This book is therefore not to be interpreted as a recantation of what I have said about other topics in my previous writings. This book does not question the conviction that there is, or rather, has been a past existing independently of what we may say or write about it, that we can make statements about the past that are either true or false, that we can explain the past either by mentioning causes or in terms of texts representing the past, that all these things can rationally be discussed and, finally, that there is no occasion for historical skepticism and that there is such a thing as progress in historical writing. This is not a book on the philosophical problems of historical writing or on the relationship between historical writing and the past. It was, however, written on the assumption that there is a stage in how we relate to the past *preceding* the one in which historians dispassionately investigate that is objectively given to them. This is the stage of sublime historical

explained a moment ago, the conception of sublime experience discussed in this book cannot be related to questions of truth and falsity. This book's thesis can therefore not be criticized for being silent about how experience may help us attain the truth about the past—for this simply is not what this book is about. I am not implying by this that questions of truth and falsity should have no application to how we relate to the past. On the contrary, I hold in high regard what philosophers of history have had to say about this. But this book addresses a different topic.

So if anyone has the firm and indestructible conviction that questions about how we relate to the past effectively that resist reformulation in terms of truth and falsity can only be useless, meaningless, and not worth of philosophical investigation, or worse still, that such questions simply do not exist, then he or she should close this book now and never open it again.<sup>25</sup>